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# Counseling Emerging Adult Clients: The Role of Attachment Relationships in Promoting Well-Being and Positive Development

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# Counseling Emerging Adult Clients: The Role of Attachment Relationships in Promoting Well-Being and Positive Development

Joel A. Lane, Ph.D. LPC NCC  
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ACA Conference  
March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014

# Overview

- The emerging adulthood phenomenon
- Our research
- Applications to counseling

JANUARY 24, 2005

THE TRUTH ABOUT  
SOCIAL SECURITY

## MEET THE TWIXTERS,

young adults  
who live off  
their parents,  
bounce from job  
to job and hop  
from mate to mate.  
They're not lazy...

# THEY JUST WON'T GROW UP

BY LEV GROSSMAN

www.time.com AOL Keyword: TIME

Why Today's Young Americans

Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—

and More Miserable Than Ever Before

Generation ☹️n

Me

Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D.

# NOT EVERYONE GETS A TROPHY



HOW TO MANAGE **GENERATION Y**

**BRUCE TULGAN**

Bestselling author of *IT'S OKAY TO BE THE BOSS* and *MANAGING GENERATION X*

I'm afraid of a world run by adults who were never spanked as kids and got trophies just for participating.





# TIME

## THE ME ME ME GENERATION

Millennials are lazy, entitled narcissists  
who still live with their parents

Why they'll save us all

BY JOEL STEIN





# THE DUMBEST



# GENERATION

How The Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans  
and Jeopardizes Our Future\*

\*OR, DON'T TRUST ANYONE  
UNDER 30  
MARK BAUERLEIN

- *“Compared to previous generations, recent high school graduates are more likely to want lots of money and nice things, but less likely to say they're willing to work hard to earn them.”* – Jean Twenge, Professor of Psychology at San Diego State University
- *“We are raising a generation of deluded narcissists.”* – Dr. Keith Ablow, Fox News
- *“Not only do millenials lack the kind of empathy that allows them to feel concerned for others, but they have trouble even intellectually understanding others points of view.”* – Time Magazine, June 2013

# Emerging Adulthood

- Distinct and necessary stage of development (Arnett, 2000; Buhl and Lanz, 2007)
- 5 Dimensions: Identity Exploration, Feeling In-Between, Instability, Possibilities, and Self-Focus (Arnett, 2000; 2004)
- Culturally constructed stage (Arnett, 1998; Nelson, Badger and Wu, 2004)
- Significance of parental and peer relationships (Tanner, Arnett, and Leis, 2009; Collins and Van Dulmen, 2006)

# Emerging Adulthood

- (Arnett, 2000, 2004): Changing social conditions have resulted in delayed developmental progressions into adulthood
- Previously normative life goals are less frequently attained by today's 25-year-olds
- Emerging adults: not quite adolescents, not quite adults

(Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012)	1970	Present
Avg. Age of Marriage- Female	20	26
Avg. Age of Marriage- Male	22	28
Avg. Age of Parenthood	21	25

# Emerging Adulthood

- **Demographics**

- Leaving home, returning, etc. (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999)
- College: More EA's going, changing major, staying longer, returning for graduate programs (Arnett, 2004)
- Romance: Earlier cohabitation, later marriage & childbirth (Flatau et al., 2007)
- Professional Life: More than 50% of EA's change career fields within 2 years after college (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008)

# Emerging Adulthood

- **Subjective Definitions of Adulthood**
  - EA's view their progression to adulthood as lengthy and nebulous:
  - Arnett (2001): “in some respects yes, in other respects no”
  - Qualitative study by Lopez et al. (2005): internal character qualities (e.g., accepting responsibility) vs. objective measures (job/relationship status)



# Emerging Adulthood

- **Identity Exploration**
  - Extended moratorium from life obligations = more time to explore identity decisions (Schulenberg et al., 2004)
  - Love, work, & worldviews (Arnett, 2004)



# Emerging Adulthood

- Importance of relationships in EA
  - Diverse social relationships (Arnett, 2007; Manago et al., 2013)
  - Social support & positive development (Galambos et al., 2006; Murphy et al., 2010)
  - Attachment transfer from parents to peers in EA (Larose et al., 2002; Schnyders & Lane, 2014; Zeifman & Hazan, 2008)

# Attachment Theory

- Attachment
  - Initial Conceptualization (Bowlby, 1969/1997)
  - “Strange Situation” (Ainsworth and Bell, 1970)
  - Expanded view of Attachment to include mother and father (Bowlby, 1969/1997)
  - Peer Attachment (Bretherton, 1992; Pitman and Scharfe, 2010; Zeifman and Hazan, 2008)

# Attachment

- Bowlby (1969/1997): Early relationships we develop with our caregivers inform our expectations of self and others
- These expectations influence and are influenced by relational experiences throughout lifespan
- Adult Attachment: Anxiety & Avoidance
- Attachment strategies are 'activated' in times of distress

# Parent and Peer Attachment as Predictors of the Perceived Experiences of Emerging Adulthood

## Study #1



# Purpose of the Study

- The purpose of this study was to identify which combination of factors associated with parent attachment, peer attachment, sex, age, ethnicity, class rank, relationship status, residential status, primary caregivers, perceived closeness of parent attachment, and perceived closeness of peer attachment predict experiences of emerging adulthood among undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 20.

# Rationale

- Although emerging adulthood has a theoretical framework (Arnett, 2000), the ways that emerging adulthood are related to and impacted by other factors that are important to development are still unknown.
- Much research related to attachment has been explored as it relates to college students rather than through the lens of emerging adulthood as a developmental stage.

# Rationale

- Research can increase understanding of the relationship between attachment and emerging adulthood—more specifically, how relationships seem to impact emerging adulthood.
- Aim to equip counselors with a developmentally-informed framework to address to work with emerging adult clients (which can impact assessment, case conceptualization, treatment methods, and the therapeutic relationship as a whole).

# Results

- Peer attachment was positively correlated with emerging adulthood; parent attachment was not significantly correlated with emerging adulthood.
- Significant differences due to gender were identified regarding which factors associated with parent and peer attachment predicted experiences of emerging adulthood.

# Attachment and Emerging Adulthood

- Peer attachment predicted the following experiences of emerging adulthood:
  - HIGHER levels of possibilities
  - HIGHER levels of self-focus
  - LOWER levels of instability

# Stepwise Regression (Men)

Peer Trust  
(Primarily)

Experiences  
of Emerging  
Adulthood

Peer  
Alienation  
(Secondarily)



# Stepwise Regression (Women)

Peer  
Communication  
(Primarily)

Experiences of  
Emerging  
Adulthood

Peer Alienation  
(Secondarily)

The Impact of Attachment Working Models and Social Support on the Subjective and Psychological Well-Being of Emerging Adults in Transition

Study #2

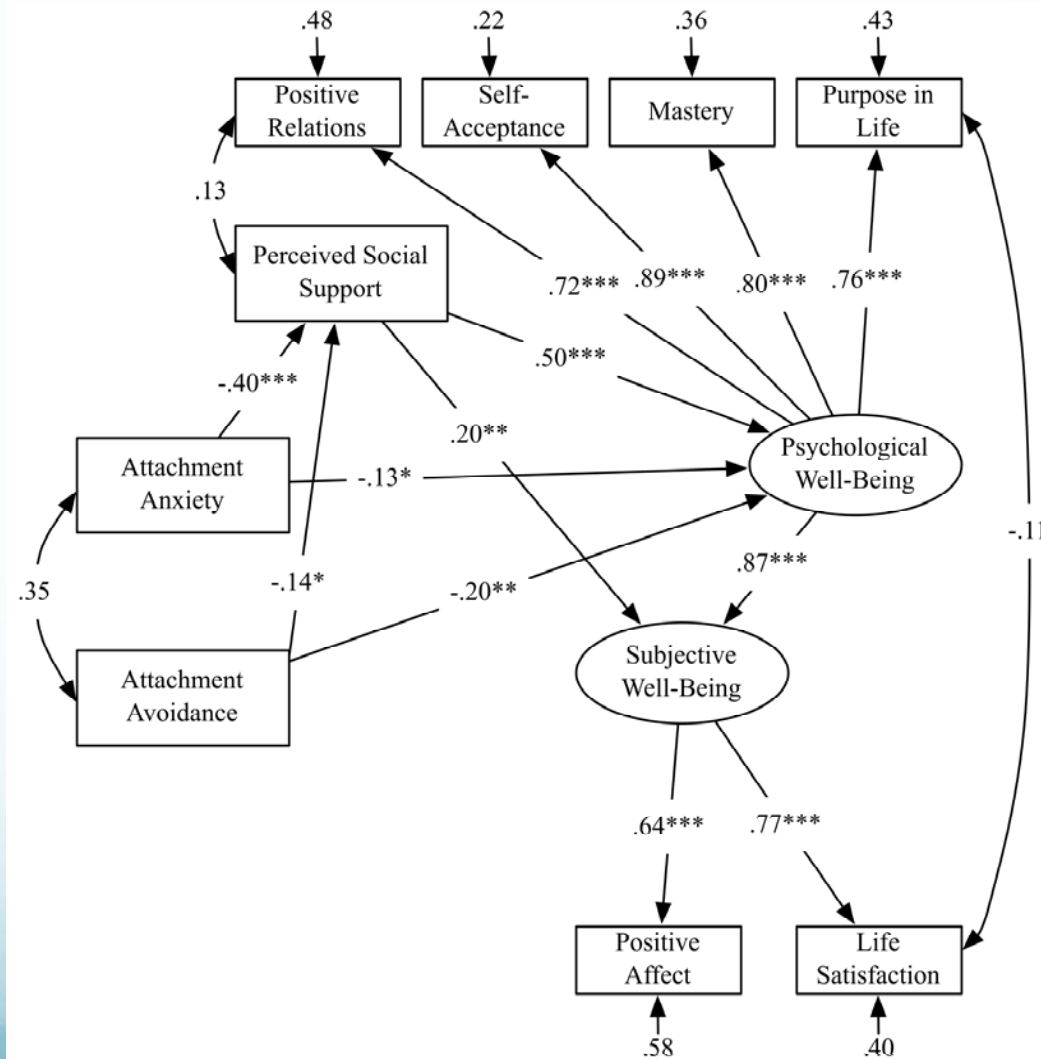
# Rationale

- Emerging adulthood is a life period marked with many significant transitions (e.g., leaving home, entering careers)
- Evidence that these transitions are critical periods for well-being & psychological distress (Lane, 2013; Lee & Gramotnev, 2007; Weiss et al., 2012)

# Purpose of the Study

- Test a theoretical model predicting the nature of relationships among attachment, social support, and two types of well-being for emerging adults who were experiencing life transition
  - *Subjective well-being*: life satisfaction, positive affect (Diener, 1984)
  - *Psychological well-being*: general psychological health & functioning (Ryff, 1989)

# Results (final model):



# Results

- All direct relationships were statistically significant in the hypothesized directions
- All mediation relationships were statistically significant

Actual model suggested by data:

Attachment → Social Support → Psy. WB → Sub. WB

Gender differences regarding parental and peer attachments in early emerging adulthood experiences

Emerging adult attachment dimensions, social support, and well-being: A differential intervening effects model

The imposter phenomenon among emerging adults transitioning into professional life: Developing a grounded theory

## Our Other Related Studies

# Gender Differences

- Peer attachment mediates relationships of parental attachment and EA dimensions

## Females:

Parental Attachment predicts: Instability\*, possibilities, self-focus, feeling in-between

Peer Attachment predicts: focus on others\*

## Males:

Parental Attachment predicts: instability\*, focus on others

Peer Attachment predicts: identity exploration, possibilities, focus on self, feeling in-between

\* = negative relationships



# Differential Intervening Effects

- Social support mediates relationship between attachment anxiety and well-being
- Social support moderates the relationship between attachment avoidance and well-being
- Low social support = no relationship
- Mean social support = moderate negative relationship
- High social support = strong negative relationship

# Implications for Counseling

Schnyders:

How do prior and current relationships impact a client's sense of self, sense of well-being, and life-stage experiences?

How might attachment relationships impact a client's experiences as an emerging adult?

How are presenting concerns related to or impacted by the connection between attachment relationships and experiences of emerging adulthood?

# Implications for Counseling

- Lane:
  - Importance of interpersonal functioning & developing supportive relationships for emerging adults
  - Anticipate attachment anxiety & avoidance barriers with clients (cf. Daly & Mallinckrodt, 2009; Mallinckrodt, 2000)
- Emerging adult life transitions

# Implications for Counseling

- “Honoring the process” of emerging adulthood
- Importance of attachment assessment
- Relational functioning in treatment planning
- Incorporating emerging adulthood considerations into various counseling theories